

Chapter 9

Lydia Lunch, *The Right Side of My Brain*

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One of the most distinctive achievements of the Downtown post-punk art movement, Lydia Lunch's 24-minute film *The Right Side of My Brain* (1985), lives beyond its No Wave moment. It deserves recognition as a major work of continuing relevance. To justify and expand that point, my strategy for this chapter will concentrate on a close analysis of the film itself, outlining its forceful features and artistic excellence. Then I will discuss it in terms of its contribution to a long tradition of dark Romanticism and its place as a major film presenting female abjection. To accomplish this, I will by necessity neglect Lunch's other work, star image, and career, which has largely been in the realm of music, writing, and spoken word performance.¹ I will also lightly pass over the film's relation to other films of the time, particularly the work of its nominal director, Richard Kern.²

There is no doubt in my mind that Lydia Lunch is the film's auteur. Her voice and the accompanying music that she designed dominate the voice-over monologue narration, establishing the ground of our understanding. Her presence on the visual track dominates the scene. Even when the camera frames one of her fantasy male lovers, he is placed within her subjective point of view because the voice-over narrator directs our comprehension.

The film begins with a description of the central character's state: dreaming, drowning, waiting. It does not move much beyond this liminal or suspended state on the soundtrack, but rather repeats and deepens the abjection. The narrator says she's drawn to 'crazy men' and repeatedly experiences that love 'hurts like hell and that's better than nothing'.³ The visual track portrays different episodes, typically in what seem like decrepit loft spaces, plus one outdoor sequence in a rural forest with a narrow defile in which Lunch is pursued by a man. This ends in a bedroom where the pursuer and pursued are observed by a young boy. The final scene includes an encounter with an exotic woman.

While we normally expect a narrative development, proceeding through events that further explain and deepen our understanding of the monologue, here the story, such as it is, circles around and around the same core obsessions. The film is in a very grainy black and white, usually lit to produce a stark and high contrast image. Shot in Super 8mm, most visuals are usually handheld and they vary in exposure and gamma.⁴ In this sense the film violates conventional standards of professional film-making. However it needs to be understood that in the context of the punk moment – musical and lifestyle and filmic – the ripped and ragged, the torn, the distressed, the limited, the obviously flawed, brand an attitude. And the gesture is more important in this aesthetic, in this kind of statement, than the art experience's contemplative moment.

The film's visuals begin with the camera moving through a dark space to a door open on a balcony while we hear Lunch in voice-over, with sound accompaniment. She is set against a twilight urban landscape, wearing a black slip with her signature layered cut black hair, full dark eye makeup, dark lips and nails. Cut to an interior as she lies on a bed, wearing black pumps, and begins caressing herself while the voice-over says she 'could hardly move from the bed'. This stasis devolves into moving 'down, down, down' while waiting for [...] 'him'. At this point the image cuts from slowly swirling around Lunch on the bed to a shirtless male doing push-ups in a tacky abandoned storefront space.

He moves to a table and chair and smokes, the camera zooms in on his face. Light from above, his eyes disappear into his head, matching Lunch's description of 'him' as 'the grave digger'. The narrator describes him as dirty, and he puts on a T-shirt and picks up a small rifle. The voice over then compares 'crazy men' who 'get hysterical [...] break everything in sight [...] because they love you so so much [...] they will try to kill you, or themselves' to 'crazy women' who 'tolerate this behavior because love is deaf and dumb and blind and it hurts like hell and that's better than nothing'. During this monologue, the man enters a room with Lunch on the bed, now in a white dress. He approaches and standing above, places the end of the rifle against her crotch while she looks at him, not expressing any distress.

The essential thesis thus appears within five minutes of the start. There is barely any further development of this idea, but just a repeated elaboration of it. In this sense the piece orbits around, again and again, the original trauma, but without ever specifying what that

Figure 9.1: 'He' places the end of his rifle between her legs. *The Right Side of My Brain* (1984).

trauma was. Origins and initial event are not significant here. Instead circling around the state of mind becomes its own obsession.

I will label the preceding events episode one. Before moving to the next scene, it is useful to reflect on the conflicting emotions and information presented here. Starkly, the action of putting the end of the rifle between her legs is the harshest image in the film, the one that conjoins the threat of rape with murderous violence. But 'he'd do whatever [...] and, she'd let him'. The image and the commentary move the film's affective state into a new place. The conventional depiction of and response to the image of rape threat and of threatened murderous violence against a woman produces shock, anxiety, fear, and sometimes retaliatory action on the part of the victim. (And a fairly complex, if predictable, set of reactions on the part of the audience, as argued by Julia Lesage in her discussion of the conventional rape-threat sequence in dramatic narrative fiction film [1994].) But here Lunch sets up a different dynamic. While the audience understands the man's gesture as a threat and an example of sadistic violence, the narrator herself excuses his action and embraces her own complicity in the scene.

This situation can be partially understood as following the fundamental punk stance of asserting just the opposite of the socially sanctioned interpretation of gestures. This is essentially a priori: what normal and normative America values, punk reverses, and the art proceeds without justifying or explaining that stance. But within its own moment in the mid 1980s, Lunch is reacting not only to the repressive normativity of Reagan America, but also, at a tangent, to the Sex Wars being carried out at the same time. Liberal feminism had moved into a crusade against pornography, seen as a corrosive patriarchal misogynist whole, and even formed alliances with the political Right against it. In response women who saw themselves as promoting an original feminist agenda of empowering women's sexuality resisted this direction as calling for a dubious 'politically correct' sexuality. This counter movement of sex rebels, feminist artists, and stigmatized activists pushed an agenda to promote sexual diversity and freedom. And this involved, at its core, repositioning sexual practice, especially S/M, as essentially theatrical, conscious and artful: a scene in which a mutual agreement mediated a theatre of power, redefining the older categorical assumptions of villains and victims.

Lunch stands at an extreme tangent to this social/political movement.⁵ *The Right Side of My Brain* functions principally as a cry from the heart expressing her own condition. There is no attempt to indicate that this is anything more than witnessing her own pain. Obviously liberal feminism would reject Lunch's testimony as unreliable and tainted by her inability to move beyond what they would see as her victim status. The sex radicals, promoting a liberatory agenda of sexual expression, adventurism, and freedom would not find *The Right Side of My Brain* a good fit either. It articulates a pained position, but never moves beyond that, a point to which I will return below.

In the next episode Lunch returns to a dream state. 'I was only dreaming'. She caresses herself. 'Something was wrong'. 'The right side of my brain was going berserk'. And these dreams are always of men. She makes a phone call; cut to her and a man caressing, kissing.

His caressing turns aggressive. She fights back but then continues, they fight and it ends with him (from her subjective point of view) hitting her with clenched fists.

The third episode begins with her wrapped in a towel in a bathroom, seemingly dazed and articulating, 'This unbearable longing for all that was bad and ugly and self destructive'. A new male figure arrives, shirtless, smoking, wearing oversized aviator sunglasses, with an exaggerated sneer. He begins opening his pants, rubbing his crotch and then grabs Lunch, kneeling before him in a black bra, and he mauls her breasts.

Scared shitless. To be on the edge of a point where you will do anything just because it feels so good to be alive and squirming under his fist. And made to do exactly what they want you to do. Because that's what you want. Time to forget. Time to not think. Time to just do it.

He pushes her head and she begins to fellate him.

The camera moves between a medium shot of Lunch caressing his ass and stroking his penis while it is in her mouth, and a low angle point of view shot from her perspective of his groaning reaction in strong *chiaroscuro*.⁶ But the sequence ends rearticulating the initial dilemma with Lunch saying once these men realize she is willing to take the abuse and have it escalate, they would never go far enough. On the visual track this is literalized by him pushing her head away and grabbing his penis, apparently before he has ejaculated.⁷ The most common reading of this scene is that the male actor represents precisely what the narrator is saying, 'They would always stop short of giving me exactly what I wanted'. But on reflection it might seem that Lunch's own sexuality and desire is so powerful, expressed through her desire for a higher degree of abjection, that it actually turns these 'crazy men' off to the point of halting their path to orgasm. Lunch is, then, the threatening woman, the Medusa figure, whose unbridled desire frightens men. He enters an elevator and leaves the scene.

The subsequent scene begins with Lunch on a set of stairs musing that she cannot escape. The camera zooms into a hole in a broken window behind her that then is a visual match for her reappearing in a cavern-like setting, outdoors, in a wooded area. She becomes alert, stands and begins to run down a narrow defile while the camera picks up another shirtless male emerging from shadows who then follows her. While visually running away from a pursuer, the narrator says she is, 'running head-long into my own demise. Running not away from it [...] but running to embrace it'. She ends in a house, he enters, and they embrace.

At this point there is an anomalous element. We see someone spying on the couple, a blond boy perhaps 8 or 9 years old, who is discovered by the man who then grabs the kid, holding him up in the air as if about to do violence. Lunch struggles to free the child, which she manages and the boy runs off. The man then violently tussles with Lunch on the bed, banging her head against the bed frame and the wall, and leaving without any consummation. The boy returns and moves to the bed.

The voice-over narration vaguely alludes to this visual scene, but in the published version of her monologue, seven years later in 1992, this part of the voice-over is eliminated.⁸

Figure 9.2: Lunch caresses Sally Ven Yu Berg and begins to choke her with her pearl necklace. *Right Side of My Brain* (1984).

In the film, the narrator says her condition is ‘never horrible enough to inflict this thick disease on the undeserving’ but the exact significance of the child remains unexplained and undeveloped.⁹

The next scene shows Lunch again in a dark indoor setting, dressed in black, with a female figure who begins to touch her. The narrator says, ‘It was as if I was beside myself’, which hints that this figure might be a double. Visually, the person is a contrast played by Sally Ven Yu Berg whose Asian features are dramatized by her remarkably high cheekbones, elevated eyebrows, and display of upper torso skin. She approaches Lunch, begins to caress her and then rips open Lunch’s shirt. The two embrace and caress, kissing. But then Lunch throws Berg back, assuming a dominating stance, over the now bound figure. She rubs Berg’s breasts, strikes her with a rod, and finally, as Berg seems to be virtually hung on hooks, begins to languidly caress her.

Before any transit to imagining a lesbian alternative to the dominant heterosexual framing of desire, Lunch reaffirms the pain. To the extent that there is a narrative closing of the piece, a climax, it comes in the last monologue:

That’s why I was torturing myself [...] I knew that I would never ever get what it was that I really wanted. To feel really, really alive [...] Fear was the best reminder of this feeble, feeble existence. So, in the end it was all worth it [...] all the shit [...] and suffering [...] and head-banging [...] and tear-jerking [...] and gut-wrenching [...] every last breath of torture. We’ll take the bad with the bad and we’ll make it worse. Alright now one more time [...] alright now one more time [...] So it kills me. So what?

The Right Side of My Brain depends on and fully exploits the 'sympathetic contract' used in first person confessional narration. This agreement rests in a mutual understanding that the author will be telling 'the truth', (or something close to reality as it is known to the obviously subjective speaking subject). And the reader/viewer will accept the narrator as sincere. Of course some narratives that appear to begin this way then involve a trick or reversal (it was just a dream, the narrator was speaking from beyond the grave, etc.), which can be taken as clever, jolly, or a betrayal of trust by the audience. And while the reader who starts with disengagement and scepticism self-protects from any shock of betrayal, she/he also loses any of the sweet rewards of enchantment.

Broadly, as a moving image and sound work, *The Right Side of My Brain* operates on three different planes or registers. First, taking the lead, Lydia Lunch's spoken narrative passionately voices her inner mind, speaking her reflective consciousness about present and past physical and emotional encounters with others. The narrator addresses the audience as if not simply describing her emotions but trying to convince listeners that this is important, justified. Or is the narrator trying to convince herself? Second, in synchrony with her enunciating voice, a no-wave music track adds context and expression. On a third level, the moving image supplements the vocal track in a fairly literal way: we assume the woman we first see is the narrator and that the actions she takes and encounters she has are the imaginative, if not literal, presentation of the interior monologue stream. However the visual track is definitely subordinate. At times the illusory contract seems to break for a small moment as the actors fleetingly reveal themselves as staging a performance.

Kern's cinematography complements the narrative mood. Very grainy black-and-white imagery shot with available light, or harshly and simply boosted lighting produces a harsh and starkly contrasting image. Whites burn out and blacks swallow up most grey tones. This effect was exaggerated in the transfer to VHS video and then in the limits of tube television screen presentation. With Lunch in the frame for most of the film, her white skin, distinctive layered medium-long black hair, and dark fully lined eye makeup combines with typically black clothing to dramatize her physical presence. As a full figured woman, her presentation highlights her body in the frame. The result is that for the most part she commands the film, although that is always and already linked to her domination of the voice track. In other words, the soundtrack is privileged above all else. To simply view the film silently, without the sound, vastly reduces its meaning and makes it seem like mostly just a bunch of lower Manhattan punks of the 1980s era hanging out in shabby surroundings, vaguely posing for the camera.¹⁰

The core conceit of Lunch's script for *The Right Side of My Brain* resides in the initially apparent paradox that pain can serve as proof of existence, that pain and pleasure are not necessarily polar opposites (which tends to be the dominant western paradigm, overlaid with a morality) but can be dialectically interdependent. Today, in the first years of the twenty-first century, this knowledge is better known in the popular imagination. The arrival of more public discussions of post-traumatic stress syndrome, of patterns of spousal/partner abuse, of theatricalized sexual bondage and discipline, and sadomasochism as a

sexual practice have made clearer the repetition and return of certain behaviours linking pain and pleasure.

It remains the case that often the default grasp on the psychodynamics of this process fall on a rather simple version of Freudian psychology. More recent decades witness other views coming forward especially from socially stigmatized communities such as cutters, and from a wider range of investigation into phenomena such as reasons why some women return to abusing husbands despite alternatives, and the impulse for some anorexic and bulimic individuals to embrace their pathology. A moral/political starting point does not really help clinicians and social interveners, no more than dealing with addictions or compulsive disorders by starting with approbation does.

But it is not simply the dialectic of pleasure/pain at stake here. Lunch's stance in the piece presents as both confessional and confrontational. She tells it the way it is, how she experiences it. But significantly, it is not a 'story': not a narration that indicates causes, origins, sources. Rather it serves as a declaration, with a basic punk stance of 'take it or leave it, I'm not going to change'. By short-circuiting the horizon of hope, that some yet-to-appear event could modify the speaker's position, Lunch's declamation allows no new future. And in reverse, she provides no explanation of origins here. Her situation just is, an existential state without a diagnosis of how we got to this point.

Actually in her body of work, and in her performing persona and legend, there is an origin story. Running away from a disastrous set of parents in Buffalo, New York, when she was about fifteen, Lunch arrived in New York City and began hanging out in the punk scene. In a prose piece, 'Daddy Dearest' (collected in the same volume as *The Right Side of My Brain*), she tells of repeated childhood sexual abuse by her father. This was one of her first spoken word performance piece, starting in 1982, several years before this film was made. Thus within her own time and the initial primary audience for the film, Lydia Lunch arrived with a legend in place. In that sense, *The Right Side of My Brain* functions as a document of its star, her image. Even Kern's advertising for the film assumed the reader already knew Lunch's importance (and not so incidentally, some of the male actors such as Henry Rollins – identified as being in the band Black Flag). Without that hipster knowledge, the film is startling, even off-putting, and calls for diverse readings.

Feminist scholar Rita Felski wrote a challenging and persuasive essay, 'Redescriptions of Female Masochism', that provides a useful context. She points out that the conceptual framework for considering female masochism over recent decades has changed with generational and political shifts.

While attitudes to gender and sexuality have undergone dramatic changes, older attitudes to female masochism persist alongside contemporary ones. We are surrounded by a plurality of vocabularies and interpretations of female sexuality, ranging from the religious to the aesthetic, from the biological to the political. As a result, images of female masochism are riven by an unusual degree of ambiguity.

(Felski 2005: 137)

Although there are multiple, overlapping, and often contrary understandings, anyone viewing *The Right Side of My Brain* will nonetheless try to frame it in one or more of those contexts.

[...] supporters of masochism can present themselves as sexual rebels defying the oppressive mantra of political correctness and defending the rights of women to pursue erotic pleasure wherever they may find it. To other feminists, however, the upsurge of popular images of female masochism is a disturbing phenomenon that can only reinforce ingrained notions about women's passivity and submissiveness.

(Felski 2005: 138)

With her initial public performer image, Lunch addressed her adult sexual desires in terms of childhood sexual abuse. Such abjection places her in the runaway/throwaway minor child community that became increasingly publically known in the 1970s and 1980s. It also connects her to the survivors of sexual abuse who began to become a better understood phenomenon at the same time, and eventually a substantial social and political force, as in the victims' revelations of sexual abuse by Roman Catholic priests beginning in the 1990s.

Using that framework immediately places Lunch in an ongoing public discussion. In *The Right Side of My Brain* she makes a simple declaration: no before, no after, just the present (painful) tense. This is reinforced by her typical use of all caps in most of her writing, a choice that limits the sense of nuance or voice or modulation in reading. At the same time, hearing her voice and the musical context she provides in the film allows for considerably more expressive variation and understanding the raw text in a fuller way. Her vocal performance dominates the soundtrack while enhanced by other sounds she engineered: breathing, vocalizations, electronic instruments, siren sounds. Vocal performance makes all the difference here. Seeing her words in print in all caps with frequent ellipses and sentence fragments flattens the vocalization and inflections of performance. This is not what we usually think of as poetry or well-crafted prose. The writing reads often as banal, clichéd, unimaginative. But enunciative expression redeems it. In other words, it is not great writing by any conventional aesthetics of verbal expression. Rather, effective in performance that includes the audience as witnesses of the narrator's condition. The narrator is implicitly asking for our understanding but not necessarily for our endorsement: witness my symptoms. However this stance combines in a tricky way with the standard punk and post-punk stance of 'in your face'. The interpretive problem defaults to sincerity. Lunch seems sincere, in contrast to many of the other films of the Downtown scene that often seem to aim at shock for no further effect (all of Nick Zedd, much of Kern) or self-parodying weak irony (the B's *Letters to Dad* [1979]).

I want to argue that *The Right Side of My Brain* belongs to a significant (though minor) tradition of Dark Romanticism. The flowering of the Romantic Movement included an underside that looked underneath the joyous view of nature and the dynamics of a vision of self-sufficient personhood to see a much more ominous and negative aspect. Typically this

has been expressed in what amounts to a reverse hierarchy in which the devil, the dark side, the occult are posed as an alternative to the existing power structure. Lunch sidesteps that rather over-worn pattern, which today flowers in pop culture's sexy vampires. While Dark Romanticism is often ignored as a tradition, some artists and thinkers do treat descent as a possible path to enlightenment. Often that move down links to alcohol, or drug experience, or forms of physical degradation. In the film at hand the move downward is psychosexual into humiliation, base feelings, that are (it is implied) somehow more authentic, stronger, and thus satisfying.

The narrative of descent can be told, validated, justified, as a journey of self-discovery. It marks a journey to redemption and a testament to endurance. But it can also be told differently, using other registers, and mark another message. In the greater cultural context of the United States, or with self-help as a mantra and consumer market, and with redemption as a universal good and goal, descent stands for a rejection of the dominant order and abjection becomes politically charged.

Julia Kristeva's 1980 book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, developed a discussion that spread extensively into critical and cultural analysis. Working from a psychoanalytic framework, the French literary critic addressed both an ongoing set of issues in French literature having to do with the extreme and dark side of the Romantic tradition and also certain moral and philosophical concerns.¹¹ Taken up in a displaced context, particularly by some Anglo-American feminists, it has been productive for gender analysis and the examination of horror films and narratives of abjection.

While productive for feminist analysis, critics discussing abjection tend to read it as simply subordination. What the example of *The Right Side of My Brain* provides is an alternative that addresses a potential energy in female abjection. That is, embracing it and taking its force. Lydia Lunch does this by locating the source of her abjection in initial bad experience that is then formulaically re-enacted in subsequent encounters with men. But she then moves to claim the experience and turns it into a source of power, of energy. Essentially this is done through the vehicle of the spoken word: by articulating, in her own voice, the structure and narrative of debasement, she can shape it. The artist role allows her to gain traction over the emotional misery of the trauma. Turning pain into art.

Over a decade later, in her confessional *Paradoxia* (1997) Lunch writes a first person autobiography of her sexual encounters with men and some women, ranging from low-life prostitution to anonymous and casual sex, to longer lasting perverse relationships. As colourful and interestingly pathological as these recollections are, they remain carefully separate from what we actually know of her as a moderately successful performer and musician who has worked with a variety of talented people in collaborative creative projects, such as her album *Queen of Siam* (1979) and her many tours of Europe. In other words, there is the accomplished professional woman – writer, performer, and musician – and there is the legend, the persona, put out for public view and fictional manipulation.¹²

The pain-into-art gesture has been and continues to be a disturbing stance. Taken from the point of view of a sympathetic viewer, one who finds or imagines that the narrator is

speaking directly to (and even for) them, the film's conclusion can be a survivor's anthem, an assertion of strength in the face of traumatic memory:

So, in the end it was all worth it [...] all the shit [...] and suffering [...] and head-banging [...] and tear-jerking [...] and gut wrenching [...] every last breath of torture. We'll take the bad with the bad and we'll make it worse. Alright now one more time [...] alright now one more time [...] So it kills me. So what?

Here, the gesture exceeds the form, the effect is bound to an abreaction of the original trauma, or the ability to imaginatively connect with it. Viewers who do not make a sympathetic contract will be unmoved, or even resentful, dismissing the film as victimology. In contrast with the cool remove of artistic modernism, or the counterculture's passion that bent towards commercial exploitation, punk and post punk called on a bond of emotional sincerity. In *The Right Side of My Brain* Lunch seems to be saying: Look, I will put it all out here for you to witness; I do not care what you think of it; this is who I am.

In part, that is a teenage gesture: the rebel without a cause, the self-absorbed dissident. But there's another tradition that Lunch draws on as well, one closer to the spontaneous overflow of emotions that we find in, say, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. In interviews Lunch has often mentioned Henry Miller, Charles Bukowski, and Hubert Selby, Jr., as writers she responded to and who gave her insight into descending into the abject in order to make art of degraded experience. Some visual art strategies of the 1980s are provided by Abject Art exemplars such as David Wojnarowicz, Ron Athey, Kiki Smith, and Nan Goldin, though Lunch has not mentioned them as parallel to her own concerns. In this way *The Right Side of My Brain* lives on, representing a psychological drama and functioning as a kind of belligerent document from and of a particular subculture.

Given that the institution of heterosexuality as we know it depends on dominance and submission, it shapes political, economic, and social practices throughout society. As Julia Lesage observes, 'Most painfully for women, heterosexuality is a major, a social and psychological mode of organizing, generating, focusing, and institutionalizing desire, both men's and women's' (1988: 240). The patriarchal framing of Lunch's iteration of heterosexual women's desire and situation remains a radical configuration balancing submission to and surrender to male power with taking of female personal power. This is not the much more familiar trope of the masochist in S/M role-playing having decisive power (by choosing the role, setting the absolute limits, presenting a safe word, and thus stage-managing the scene). Rather it usurps the downside, the dark side, of the exchange. While male power is a social fact, in this case female embrace of abjection reveals itself as potentially and perhaps actually more profound, more powerful, more threatening.

At the same time, Lunch's position does not offer any social answer to the situation. As with the now-familiar art gesture of dealing with emotional and physical trauma, reference to the trauma effect is a basic element. But what ends up being validated within the vast landscape of trauma (ranging from genocide to torture, exile to psychosis, illness to dispossession) in art,

Figure 9.3: Restless, Lunch caresses herself. *Right Side of My Brain* (1984).

or art career, is transcendence: taking it to another level. Shocking impact is the initial grounding point of Abject Art: minimally it draws (or disgusts) an audience by producing a strong reaction. But without a progression (beyond escalating effects), the form exhausts itself.

But where could it go? Contemporary film culture has tended to offer two possibilities. On the mainstream and commercial side, female traumatic abjection has offered the rape-revenge cycle with the horror of the initial abuse then providing the justification for female warrior pay-back. This direction encompasses the obviously commercial films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2003–2004) and the indie art-house films such as Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi's *Baise-Moi/Fuck Me* (2000) and Talia Lugacy's *Descent* (2007). A different approach and register can be found in some feminist experimental autobiographical video art such as Lynn Hershman-Leeson's *Electronic Diaries* (various iterations to c. 1995). Julia Lesage has analysed this vein of video art, particularly Hershman-Leeson:

Heirs to the romantic tradition of using art as a tool for psychic expression, women and artists from dispossessed groups have used the tactics of the romantic artist to give voice to what had been voiceless in their environments, to provide especially for their group the open and public articulation of other subjectivities that the dominant culture systematically denies and silences.

(1999: 327)

Lesage then extends the analysis by comparing the elaborated form of the videos to the fragmented consciousness she sees as part of artists working through issues of feminine

masochism. Lunch, of course, is not a video artist and *The Right Side of My Brain* is a one-off, totally bound into her writing and performing activity, an action that circles round and round re-enacting the initial trauma.

The existential nature of trauma is that the first event remains unassimilated and thereafter it possesses the survivor, physically and mentally. Change and healing may take place, but other later events can reanimate the trauma effect. Art that works in this vein sometimes transcends the initial horizon. It attains a qualitative change through personal, social, or generational development. In some interviews and scattered writings, Lunch has offered a fuller analysis and understanding of her social views, but her performance and writer persona does not show much development. *The Right Side of My Brain* exists as a rant, a monologue that stays with the raw and undigested. And at 24 minutes, it more or less exhausts that form. It remains a disturbing testament to the power of an artist to confront the dark side and to endure and empower.

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Notes

- 1 Arriving in New York City as a teenage runaway, Lunch began her career as a musician with the short-lived band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (1976–1979). She appeared as a striking character in several well-regarded short films by Vivienne Dick such as *Guerillière Talks* (1978), *She Had Her Gun Already* (1978), and *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979). Dick, an Irish expat who was active in the Downtown scene, returned to Ireland in 1982, taking her Super 8mm films with her. Because they were no longer distributed, their reputation waned, although they were clearly the most distinguished films of the era. Lunch tended to be identified as a spoken word performer around 1982. Her website, <http://www.lydia-lunch.org>, provides details. The fan website, <http://www.fromthearchives.org>, supplies a detailed chronological list of her performances, recordings, film, video performances, and bibliography.
- 2 Kern continued the strain of low-rent film-making begun by other post punk artists and was often paired with Nick Zedd as self-promoted 'Cinema of Transgression', with in-your-face sexual and physical violence, usually against women.
- 3 My quotes from the soundtrack are my transcription checked against the print version in Lunch's *Incriminating Evidence* (1992). In the print version Lunch used all caps and ellipses. She used an autobiographical first-person mode (the default speech mode of most spoken word performers) but also in interviews disavowed any direct autobiographical

- reportage or confession. However, as was common in this era of New York City spoken word art, the general audience and critics assumed it was essentially 'authentic' and only slightly transformed. Lunch began this phase of her career with 'Daddy Dearest', a blistering indictment of her father as having sexually abused her since age six.
- 4 Kern saw that inexpensive Super 8mm synch sound films could be transferred to the emerging VHS video format and easily marketed. Thus while other post-punk film-makers tended to simply seek NYC Downtown art scene screenings that promoted their immediate local reputation, Kern's work was often available through the alt and zine world. Subsequently he honed his technical skills in still photography and has had a successful career in glossy erotica/porn and celebrity portraiture.
 - 5 Lunch did publically identify herself with the sex rebels' side, particularly in criticizing arts censorship.
 - 6 This section includes some of the weakest acting in the piece. The male performer (Clint Ruin, aka Jim Thirlwell) seems to be trying to indicate a snarling and self absorbed or selfish cruelty, but the physical gestures of licking his lips, slightly protruding his tongue, and seeming to sneer, are all rather overdone. The actor has a striking look with a deep cleft chin and rather gaunt body. The large sunglasses he wears turn his face into a mask and exaggerates small facial expressions, which results in a failed sense of menace. On the cut to his pushing her face away, he suddenly has a brand new cigarette dangling in his mouth, which if noticed as a continuity goof further undercuts the moment.
 - 7 This scene can be interpreted in different ways: he is intimidated by her escalating desire and flees, or (possibly) he ejaculated into her mouth. Facial ejaculation was present at this time in commercial hard core porn, but had not become the common trope that it did later in heterosexual porn. Commercial porn – experiencing increased pressure and prosecution on federal and state levels in the Reagan era – tended to move away from any representations of violence, rape, or coercion. This was partly a response to feminist anti-pornography organizing and the slogan 'porn is violence against women', partly a response to film porn moving from male audience theatrical screenings to the expanding home video porn market including couples. The Cinema of Transgression film-makers, particularly Zedd but also Kern, flaunted the law and the direction of commercial porn by ramping up violence and gore.
 - 8 The original film credits list Lunch and Kern as the writers. The 1992 version of the script in the collection *Incriminating Evidence* credits only Lunch.
 - 9 The presence of the child can be most readily understood in the fuller context of Lunch's work, particularly the introductory essay to *Incriminating Evidence*, 'Built for Abuse', which indicts her parents, especially her father, for a bankrupt household of drinking, and verbal and emotional abuse. The charge goes much farther in the essay, 'Daddy Dearest', which details her father's sexual abuse of her as a very young child, abuse that continued for years. Lunch had been performing 'Daddy Dearest' for several years before the film was shot. Lunch recapitulated many of these issues in her *Paradoxia: A Predator's Diary* (1997).
 - 10 Ironically, unexpectedly, seeing the film without the soundtrack heightens the repetition of bodice-ripping poses, thus inadvertently suggesting a deeper link between conventional female romance genre tales and these post-punk fantasies.

- 11 Kristeva's earlier work initially argued for a 'revolution' in poetic language by figures such as the previously marginalized poet Lautréamont. After passing through a temporary 'Maoist' phase, Kristeva by the late 1970s backed off any political claims. Born within the hothouse world of Parisian critical contestation, the abjection argument, when taken up by outsiders, lost some of its local significance (such as its obvious response to Sartre's concept of Nausea) and became a detached meme. The book generated an overall conception of the process of abjection that it then applied in the second half to the work of the novelist Céline whose writing often expressed disgust with women, particularly the maternal body as monstrous. This line of thinking was productively appropriated and critiqued for gender analysis by figures such as Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) used it in developing an influential analysis of horror film.
- 12 The most recent book about her career, *Lydia Lunch: Interviews by V. Vale* (2013) offers a much richer and less 'angry' image of the performer, and in contrast to a career of publicity and performance photos stressing her as a brooding, suspicious, perhaps dangerous woman, it includes recent snapshots with friends in the conventional 'having a good time' smile mode.

Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001

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